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ABSTRACT

During the 1992-93 school year, Billings School District #2 implemented full inclusion of students with disabilities at Garfield Elementary. A Regular Education Initiative Committee of district administrators, teachers, board members, parents, community representatives, and Eastern Montana College faculty met on a regular basis to study the feasibility of including students with disabilities in regular education. Subcommittees researched attitudes and awareness, needs of students, needs of teachers, implementation issues, and impact on regular education. The committee recommended inclusion in its final report to the board of education. At Garfield Elementary, all students were placed in regular classrooms, and special education teachers began collaborating with regular educators in the regular settings. Other interested schools in the district implemented inclusion on a more limited basis. Achievement test data demonstrated consistent academic gains made by regular education students. Students' progress toward IEP goals and objectives demonstrated achievement of annual goals in all but one or two cases, and phenomenal 2- to 3-year gains in several. Overall teacher attitudes tended to be neutral or slightly negative, while attitudes of teachers involved in inclusion were positive. Billings inclusion efforts are useful to rural administrators seeking guidelines for inclusion and to regular and special teachers seeking strategies for collaboration and instruction. (KS)

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN BILLINGS, MONTANA: A PROTOTYPE FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

Abstract

During the 1992/93 school year, Billings School District #2 implemented full inclusion of students with disabilities at Garfield Elementary. The district had been studying the feasibility of inclusive education for two years previously and designated Garfield as a pilot site for inclusion. At the close of the 1993/94 year, the district evaluated its fledgling inclusion efforts. The Billings experience can be shared with rural educators as a guide for designing quality inclusive education in rural areas. Billings inclusion efforts are applicable to rural administrators seeking guidelines for inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms and to both regular and special teachers seeking strategies for collaboration and instruction. The emphasis here is on the process followed for implementing inclusive educational practice, rather than on the continuing debate over the viability of Inclusion.

Introduction

Inclusive educational practice is sweeping our country. Inclusion is not synonymous with REI, but is an outgrowth of the Regular Education Initiative. In 1986, Madeline Will questioned the efficiency, and efficacy of the dual special /regular education framework in which we had been working since the 1975 passage of Public Law 94-142. She suggested a unified system which would include all students with mild disabilities in regular educational programs as an alternative. Such a system could improve the education of all students by joining the efforts of special and regular personnel in provision of programs. Inclusion grew from Will's original proposal. Parents, educators, and theorists began to question limiting unification to the education of students with mild disabilities. Seeing both academic and social growth of both regular and special students in inclusive settings, they asked, "Why not include students with severe disabilities as well?" The die was cast.

History of Inclusion in Billings District #2

Billings and Yellowstone County are Montana's most populated area. Together, they represent approximately 14 percent (113,419) of the state's total population. Billings provides a network of resources, including air, rail, and bus transportation, two medical centers, two colleges and a vocational/technical center, as well as energy and agriculturally related industry, which make it the hub of eastern Montana.

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The smaller communities within the state look to the Billings Public School District to provide proactive educational leadership. The district provides excellent educational opportunities as supported by scores on yearly achievement tests given throughout the schools. The district is composed of 24 elementary schools, four middle schools, three high schools, one career, and one administration center which houses an adult education program.

Current school enrollment is 17,869 students. Special educational services are provided to 2,058 children or 12 percent of Montana's children with disabilities aged 3 through 21 years. Of the state's infants and toddlers with disabilities, 12 percent are served by the Billings District through a contract with the Department of Developmental Disabilities.

The Billings schools continue to provide a full continuum of special educational options, but have developed an inclusive education thrust over the past three years. Recognizing their own dual system and in response to Will's (1986) proposal to unify regular and special education, the district formed an REI Committee. The group of twenty-two members included district administrators, teachers, board members, parents, community representatives, and Eastern Montana College faculty. During the 1990/91 and 1991/92 school years, the committee met on a regular basis to study the feasibility of including students with disabilities in regular education as the rule rather than the exception.

Initially, information sessions were needed so that everyone had at least a basic understanding of the problem and of educational terminology. Subcommittees were formed according to educational level of interest--preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school. Each committee researched the following areas: (a) attitudes and awareness; (b) needs of students; (c) needs of teachers; (d) implementation issues; and (e) impact on regular education. The subcommittees carried out their charge through surveys, interviews, review of materials, and small group discussions. Representatives of the committee as a whole visited pilot schools in the state of Washington, and the committee chairperson visited schools in Endicott, New York, and Coudersport, Pennsylvania. In the spring of 1992, a proposal for inclusive education was presented to the school board.

Although initially reluctant with regard to Inclusion, the committee fully supported the practice in its final report. The following recommendations were made to the board:

1. Increase the opportunity for full inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms, as teachers, parents,and staff are trained and as resources are developed. The central focus for placement should be the individual needs of students.
2. Develop a pilot program for full inclusion at one elementary school for all students with disabilities living within that school's attendance area.

3. Develop and implement a program to prepare students from kindergarten to 12th grade to accept other students who have differences in appearance, learning style, and capability.
4. Support regular classroom teachers who serve students with disabilities by giving them extra time to plan, inservice opportunities, resources and materials as needed, reduced class loads, paraprofessional assistance, and district incentives for completion of additional training.
5. Ensure integrity of regular classroom instruction through provision of sufficient support.
6. Expand inservice opportunities to administrators, support staff, and various classified staff.
7. Evaluate outcome of inclusion efforts.

The Pilot Year

Garfield Elementary School was chosen as the pilot inclusion site. Garfield maintains a population of over 400 students, approximately 50 of whom qualify for special education services. The majority of children come from a lower socioeconomic background and represent varied ethnicity. Beginning in the 1992/93 school year, all students were placed in regular classrooms. Special education teachers, previously providing pull-out services began collaborating with regular educators in the regular settings. As a Professional Development School, Garfield receives additional assistance from Eastern Montana College in the form of faculty participation and as a site for preservice student field experiences.

Other interested elementary and secondary schools within the district implemented Inclusion on a more limited basis. Sandstone Elementary placed all of its special education students in one class per grade level. Although not the inclusive ideal, Sandstone did not have the special education resources to distribute students with disabilities proportionately. Eagle Cliffs Elementary included some students with severe disabilities in regular classes. Numbers of students with severe disabilities are disproportionately high at Eagle Cliffs. Because Eagle Cliffs is accessible, students are bussed there from across the district. Some of the teachers at this school have been understandably wary of inclusion. The middle schools throughout the district are moving to a center based model in which teachers are on teams, have a team planning time, and provide for students, whether labeled as special education or not, in a center on an as needed basis. During the second semester of the 1992/93 school year, one of the district high schools included fifteen 9th grade special education students in regular academic core classes. Regular and special education staff at the school volunteered to participate in the project, had additional planning time, and made various adjustments for the included students. Pockets of inclusive practice can be found in the two high schools and elementary schools other than those discussed.

Evaluation Efforts and Results

In response to a school board request and in compliance with the original committee proposal, the special education department conducted an extensive evaluation of the district's inclusion efforts at the end of the 1992/93 school year. Achievement test data demonstrated consistent academic gains made by regular education students. Detailed review of special education students' progress toward IEP goals and objectives demonstrated achievement of annual goals in all but one or two cases and phenomenal two to three year gains in others. Teacher reports attested to social development by both regular and special students in inclusive settings. Teachers at the high school level lauded the team approach, recommended reduced class sizes, and cautioned that three regular classes per semester may be too demanding for some students with disabilities. District teacher attitudes tended to be neutral or slightly negative toward Inclusion overall. However the teachers actually involved in Inclusion were positive, sometimes glowing in their reports. Teachers, whether involved in inclusion or not, whether special education, or not, responded positively to the need for training.

As a result of the evaluation, the school board decided to continue Inclusion within Billings schools. The practice will be implemented in current sites and will be expanded slowly as teachers receive more information and training, and as resources to support the practice are accrued. The district developed an inclusion planning guide for schools as they initiate more inclusive practice. In addition, Billings has developed a menu of inservice training needs, and has received a state grant to begin staff development during the present school year.

Inclusion awareness, having been identified as a critical need of both teachers and administrators, is a current inservice goal. The following activities support goal accomplishment: (a) continued publication of the Inclusion newsletter *Speaking of Inclusion*; (b) distribution to each school of an Inclusion "starter kit" with basic information and examples of best inclusive practice; (c) provision of ongoing training to include general information, philosophy, legal bases, issues, and problem solving for administrators and teachers.

Current Inclusion Committee Activity

The REI Committee, renamed the Inclusion Committee, continues to function, but with new members. In order to maintain a balanced perspective, the committee membership will not remain static, but will change as new board members take the place of old and as additional stakeholders are identified. The district feels strongly that both Inclusion advocates and opponents be represented. The committee meets on a regular basis, and works following the ground rule of not rethinking previous committee decisions. The momentum is thus to move forward, rather than becoming mired in the past.

The Inclusion Committee's role is to set the direction for inclusive educational practice in the Billings schools and to identify areas needing support. The group has recommended the following strategies: (a) provide information for district parents to include a home-school inclusion newsletter, and a televised

Inclusion panel; and (b) gather information on self-contained students' needs in the event that the district moves to a total Inclusion model.

Application to Rural Schools

Billings is by Montana standards a large urban community; by most standards, this small city represents middle America. Garfield Elementary, situated in a low socioeconomic area and populated with children of varied ethnicity represents a microcosm of rural Montana with her depressed economy, seven Indian reservations and growing Hispanic population. The organized sequence of activities which the Billings school district employed to introduce inclusive education is not limited to the community, but is applicable to rural cooperatives and districts interested in introducing inclusive practice in an orderly fashion to their schools .

In many rural areas, students are "included" in regular education because there is a lack of special services. Other rural schools may continue with pull-out programs because personnel lack the information and training to do otherwise. The Billings experience can help rural schools by providing a structure for inclusive education, by sharing information about inclusive educational practice essential for schools in remote areas, and by advising rural districts and cooperatives how to avoid mistakes made in the change process.

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